



## **Slither and Choke** by **LunalitSol**

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**Summary:** High School may be new, but nothing else is. Or: Billy is a piece of shit, Will is trying to be less passive, and El/Jane isn't used to letting things go (or to the horrible words she doesn't understand). T/W for period-typical homophobia, racism, strong/explicit language, and bullying, as well as allusions to canon d/v. Spoilers for the entirety of seasons one and two. Oneshot.

## Slither and Choke

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"Hey look, it's the monkey screwing my sister."

Their party aside from Max and El was back behind the high school, the loose gathering of their bodies tightening closer together at the sound of Billy's voice.

"What is the fucking voodoo you little bitches have worked on her, huh?"

They shifted and fidgeted as a whole, their own little hive mind of awkwardness, anxiety, and bubble-pop, hangnail anger.

"Just so you know, she might have played tough that day, but Maxine can't do jack shit in our house. I'm also still her ride, and now your fucked up little club is also in my school- with no Harrington around to take your beatings for you. Guess what that means- for you and for her."

"Shut the hell up, Billy," Lucas growled. "It's been almost a year. When are you going to get over yourself?"

Billy seemed to ripple at that, half contorting smugness, half muscle-contracting, deadly rage.

"I don't know, Lucas Sinclair. When are you going to clean the black off your skin? When are you even going to get over your dorky games and," his voice pitched mockingly a couple octaves higher, "science stuff?"

Will saw Lucas drawing up tenser and tenser, like a wind up toy just a couple spins from going haywire.

Mike and Dustin were restless but quiet.

His revulsion slid an intangible film over Will's eyes, and it was something akin to watching organisms writhe in detail under a microscope. The itch of grime on his skin amped up, and he

remembered viscerally the feeling of crystal sight inside a body he no longer controlled. Remembered watching and listening as his own voice sprang a trap.

"Leave Lucas alone," Will demanded loudly, stepping forward and between them.

Billy's eyes turned on him, gleaming under the glare of sunlight. His lip curled, twisted.

"Well if it isn't zombie boy, the undead faggot. Was I talking to you Byers?"

There was the barest second of hesitation before Will steeled his voice to answer. In his ears was the scrape of crayon on paper, a flash in his periphery of the words Bob Newby Superhero in a red like diluted blood.

"It doesn't matter. Lucas is my friend. So is Max."

"Oh really?"

Billy chortled darkly, licking his lips and looking Will up and down.

"You know I've heard a lot about you, Byers. What really happened to you huh? I heard your whole death was bullshit, that you were actually just taken by another pervert, but your crazy mom tried to cover it up when she found out you liked it. Is that true, Byers? Or, and this one's good, you realized what a freak you were when some old fucker stuck it up your ass and when you figured out you liked it you tried to do everyone a favor and off yourself in the quarry. But you failed. Which is it fairy boy? You want to go and insert yourself in shit that's not your business, so let's talk, kid."

Billy was closer than he'd been before, eyes lasered in on Will like a beholder at the end of a long, perilous campaign.

Will swallowed hard around the stones in his throat, collecting acrid at the back of his mouth. When did everything get so tunnel dark around them?

He heard Mike murmuring his name as if from a distance, muffled to

his ears as though Will was in the Upside Down all over again. His fingers curled in the roughness of denim on his thighs, feeling the way the material rubbed and bunched under the tautness of his knuckles.

Billy looked him up and down again, his eyes burning with anger and pleasure mixed like a cocktail, salaciousness a circle around each of his corneas.

There was a feeling in Will's chest like a Demogorgon slug wanting to come up.

"The fairy too turned on to reply? It's those daddy issues, isn't it? I've heard about your dad too. You know, it's funny in small towns how people talk. He hit your mom and your brother and you right? He told everyone you were a queer. I even heard when he came for your funeral that he said he was glad you were dead, did you know that? It's always the creeps with dads that hate their guts and moms that treat them like little girls who end up like you."

"Billy, shut up!"

When had Max gotten there?

"Hey, he brought this on himself, Maxine. Wanted to protect your little negro boyfriend. Let me ask you guys- you so concerned about him because he's a fucked up weirdo that came back from the-" air quotes "-dead? Or is it because he goes under the table when you guys have your stupid fucking Dragon meetups and sucks all your little hairless cocks?"

"That's disgusting," Will heard Mike exclaim. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I agree," Billy said, his eyes fixed on Will's, fire inside them. "It is disgusting."

Will knew he was trembling and shrinking but he couldn't feel it. The sounds of the Upside Down were screams in his ears. He ached with the simultaneous desire to scream back and the paralyzing ricochet of muteness climbing slime-like and burning up his throat.

"You know what they say- only two things come back from the dead: the savior and the devil. You evil, Byers? An evil fag freak? You need help putting yourself down?"

"Leave him alone!"

That was Dustin.

Billy's eyes didn't even flicker toward him. His boots scraped against the cement as he came one step, another, another, closer to Will.

"Come on Will," Mike's voice was urgent, and Will suddenly realized his friend's hand was pulling at the back of his shirt.

"What's going on?"

"El- Jane. It's okay," Mike's words were hasty, too loud, too forced and afraid.

"Mouth-"

Will drew a shaking breath to interrupt Jane's question before it pulled Billy's ire onto her.

"I'm okay Jane."

Billy's eyes were flint on them, callously measuring like a cobra's and shining with a just-barely-veiled aggravation.

Will's head was pounding. There was a whisper soft echoing pulling at his inner ear of his own scratchy voice shouting, begging, for the shadow monster to go away. An exercise in futility as predator zeroed in on prey.

"Are you okay, little fag? Are you sure? Because I also heard your freaky big brother gave you AIDS."

Will launched forward with something like a roar, but Billy just caught him, turning him around, thick, python arms locking over his head and neck, and held him like a shield, hot laughter on the top of Will's head.

"Let him go!"

Mike's voice was louder than Will had heard it in at least a few months, his face crested with angry red. Dustin had taken over the duty of muttering placating words in Eleven's direction while Lucas was being held back by one of Max's arms, his eyes murderous, hers narrowed and calculating.

"Let's just go home, Billy," Max spoke up suddenly. "Your dad was going to be home early today, wasn't he? I'd hate if he were waiting on us."

Billy's forearms tightened further over Will's neck for a moment, but then Will was going face first into the pitch dark of gravel and pavement. The sensation of blood instantly breaking through skin brought bracing panic worse than any of it so far, crawling and constricting over him like vines.

His friends were around him in seconds, hands finding purchase just above his elbows and hauling him up onto unsteady feet.

"I'm so sorry Will," Max's voice was whispering from his right. "Thank you for standing up for Lucas though."

Her arms went around him for half a breath and then she was taking off.

"I could have hurt him," Jane said petulantly just as Will's vision stopped swimming. "He is bad."

"He is, but you can't," Mike retorted.

There was tension in every line of Mike's body, frustration sharpening his voice.

"But he can hurt Max and Will?"

"We can take it," Lucas told El, words curt.

She stared back at him, eyes keen and penetrating. Will looked between them, heart in his throat, fighting as best he could against an overwhelming urge to flee the conversation, the school, the town,

the world. He'd been getting a lot of practice resisting that feeling lately, yet it still came for him, immersive like quicksand.

"El, we're used to this stuff," Dustin tried to explain. "Yeah, it's shitty, the physical bullshit and the, you know, the words people say... but, this is the way it is and we can stand all that crap more than we could losing another party member."

El's eyes were dark and angry, but she seemed to understand.

Then: "The words... What is a ne-"

"Don't say it," Dustin said quickly, and all their eyes flicked to Lucas.

Lucas's jaw set hard.

"Negro and all that shit, it's just racist bullshit. ...Racism is like, when people hate you and think you're not as...human or important or whatever as they are because you're black like I am," Lucas gestured vaguely to the skin on his arm.

"Or Asian," Mike added to El, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"- or whatever," Lucas continued, shooting Mike a dark look, "Like blacks, we were actual slaves like a hundred years ago, and, well, it's a long story and there's a lot to it, but there's still a lot of racism and also a lot of people that are better about it, but enough that aren't, that are still really shitty or don't care, that you hear horrible crap about it a lot."

Eleven paused, looking carefully at Lucas as she soaked that in, before-

"Is fag like that but for people who are like Will? And Mike?"

Will coughed hard, feeling his face start to burn, while Mike spluttered out a, "What? No! It's not- I'm not- I- No? I mean, it's uh not for white people. It's for, uh, like, well..."

"It's a bad word like the n-word is," Dustin interjected, rolling his eyes at Mike. "But it's for when a guy likes other guys the way that Mike likes you or Lucas likes Max."



Jane looked back at Will, brow furrowed.

"But how can you tell? His skin is like Mike's and yours is."

Will's ears buzzed.

Fuck fighting.

"You know what guys, I'm gonna go find Jonathan or something. I'll see you later."

"Will, man, you don't have to do that."

Lucas tried to reach out to him as he spoke, but Will shrugged his hand off.

"Will-"

"Guys, I really just want to go home. My face hurts and I'm tired. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry," Dustin tried to say.

Will didn't really want to hear it.

"Sorry," he muttered, "I'll see you guys later."

He'd told Jonathan he was probably going to the arcade with the guys, but with everything that had happened...

When Will got to the library, it was mercifully all but empty. Benefits of it being a Friday, maybe. Will sought out a back corner and sank to the floor, darting eyes around before pulling out some paper and crayons.

The images were a throb like blood in his head, in his veins, but the feeling of the crayon in the crook of his fingers was a needle in his skin alleviating some of the pressure.

Under his hand, a new version of 'Zombie Boy' took shape.

Will remembered Jonathan asking about Zombie Boy so close to a year ago now, asking who he was, and the pang of resignation to

Will's ownership.

Will outlined and emboldened the label, the black words "Zombie Boy: The Undead Faggot", in a garish crimson.

If Jonathan asked again who the titular boy was, he didn't know what he would say.

The words of all of these assholes, of his dad and Troy and James and Billy and countless more, they were all there in his head with the demogorgons and the mind flayer and, lost in the cacophony, his own voice- somewhere.

There was a powerlessness he could never really get away from, his world muffled and upside down, his voice never quite reaching anyone else even as he heard theirs bouncing everywhere around him. It was like the shadow monster never quite left him, like the thick invasion of demogorgon inside him was never fully removed.

Will almost wished he could have stayed and explained this all to Jane the way Lucas had so bravely handled starting to tell her about the racism their town and country and world were soaked in, but the words were dust in his lungs, and Will was not like Lucas.

He wasn't really sure who he was like any more, couldn't see well enough in the darkness to make out his own form.

Will pressed down harder on his paper tourniquet and continued drawing until the library was closed.